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ABSTRACT

A study examined changing skill requirements for the occupation of sales assistant in the United Kingdom. Data were collected from four sources: a review of the existing literature; exploratory interviews with key contacts concerned with sales assistants' skills/training; in-depth interviews of 19 employers; and a seminar at which the study participants discussed/reviewed the preliminary findings. Special attention was paid to the following: changing skill requirements; ways employers attempt to measure/assess skills; recruitment difficulties and skill gaps; provision of training; and future concerns. It was discovered that increasing competition in retailing is resulting in greater emphasis on customer service and, consequently, on the sales assistants' role in meeting/exceeding customer demands for service. The employers interviewed expected their sales assistants to do the following: be literate and numerate, have strong personal skills, provide good customer service, be able to sell, be computer literate, know the products they sell and the products/services provided by their organization, pay attention to their store's physical environment, take responsibility for a wide range of tasks, show initiative, and work harder and more efficiently. Employers appeared to be paying more attention to recruitment and employee assessment, and most organizations included in the study were providing training for their sales assistants. (Contains 27 references.) (MN)

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Executive Summary

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to conduct a programme of work exploring the nature of employers' skill requirements within occupations. This report presents the findings of a study on sales assistants in the retailing industry.

The study included: a review of existing literature; exploratory interviews with key players in the field; interviews with managers in 19 retail organisations; and a forum at which the research findings were discussed with participants in the study. The fieldwork was undertaken between Autumn 1995 and early 1996.

The retail industry: pressures and change

The retail sector has experienced considerable change in recent years, and the pace and impact of change continues to play an important role, influencing the nature of the industry and the skills required. In particular, this study identified the following pressures:

- developments in technology
- a high level of competition
- increasing demands from customers
- the adoption of new working practices
- finding new opportunities for expansion
- the extension of trading hours.

Price continues to be a key factor in competition between retail organisations, but it was frequently not enough. Different retailing organisations adopt varying strategies for meeting the

needs and demands of their customers and in focusing their customer service. Great emphasis is placed on the quality of customer service, and therefore the skills and abilities of sales assistants.

Sales assistants: an increasingly skilled role

The key focus of this study was the skills required of sales assistants by employers and how these were changing. Our evidence suggests that the role of sales assistants is expanding and they are being expected to adopt a more professional approach to their jobs.

The main skills and abilities required of sales assistants can be summarised under the following headings:

- personal characteristics — obtaining people with the right attitudes and outlook was seen as essential; in particular, people who liked working with, and serving people were sought
- basic literacy and numeracy
- customer service skills
- selling skills
- computer literacy
- product knowledge
- a knowledge of the law and other regulations
- taking responsibility and initiative
- other areas, including using the telephone, merchandising and housekeeping.

Our data do not suggest that the job of a sales assistants is being deskilled. They were expected to cover a wider range of tasks and have a greater depth of knowledge within many of the areas listed. In particular, there was a growing need for people to work smarter, more efficiently and flexibly, especially as it was not always possible to be prescriptive about the needs of customers.

Indicators of skill

The recruitment of sales assistants was most often the responsibility of store and line managers. Although efforts were being made to train and develop managers in this role, respondents admitted there was still some scope for discretion and therefore

variations in approach. Nevertheless, personnel departments were attempting to formalise and give more structure to the selection of sales assistants.

In some organisations, various forms of tests, including group exercises, role play and psychometric tests were used, or their potential was being explored. However, the interview was the main method of assessing the suitability of potential recruits. Qualifications played little role in the recruitment process. Managers were more concerned with assessing a person's personality, interest in and approach to dealing with people.

Once recruited, the performance and abilities of the majority of sales assistants continued to be assessed through a variety of methods, including:

- appraisal systems
- monitoring and observation by managers
- comments made by visitors to the stores
- customer complainants, surveys and general feedback
- mystery shoppers.

Skills gaps

Few organisations were having difficulty recruiting people as sales assistants. However, there was a general feeling that they could not always attract people of a high enough calibre, exhibiting the necessary personal abilities and attitudes. Sales jobs are traditionally regarded as low skilled and requiring little special ability. Respondents reported efforts to move away from this perception, encouraging the view that selling does require particular abilities and skills.

In most organisations, it was felt that a gap did exist between the skills and abilities of current employees and those ideally wanted. However, this was not perceived to be causing any major problems. It was more frequently reported that this gap was as much a failing on the part of managers as sales assistants themselves. The demands made of assistants have been changing and expanding. It takes time to embed the necessary cultural change promoting these roles, and for suitable training and development to take effect.

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Training and development

Training and development activities were reported to be very important. Ensuring these activities were made available to all staff, especially those working very few hours was a particular difficulty faced.

There was evidence of a move away from formal, classroom based teaching, and for training activities to become more focused on the needs of the business. Training was being delivered through a range of mechanisms, including workbooks, computer terminals, videos, coaching and mentoring.

Training and development activities were being used for a variety of purposes, for example:

- the induction of new employees
- to introduce new procedures, including approaches to customer service and selling, and products
- to embed cultural and organisational change
- to address shortfalls in performance, either of individuals or groups
- to update and reinforce employee skills.

Looking to the future

Many of the trends and themes outlined above will continue to be important to retail organisations. In particular, this study identified a number of areas of concern for the future. These included:

- obtaining the right people — the continuing importance of people skills and how to enhance these
- rewarding and motivating people without increasing costs
- addressing changing customer demands, including the extension of opening hours, and keeping up with, or ahead of, the competition
- meeting and coping with the opportunities offered by technology
- ensuring managers have the necessary skills and attitudes, especially for managing and motivating people, to take the industry forward.

1. The Sales Assistants Study

1.1 Introduction

The Department for Education and Employment commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake a programme of research titled the Skills Review Programme. The aim is to explore the changing nature of skill requirements within occupations, to complement the work conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IER) which, amongst other things, reviews broad trends in the occupational structure of the workforce. The Skills Review Programme involves conducting a series of eight occupational studies, covering the main SOC groups (with the exception of the routine and unskilled occupations). The main focus is on the skills required by employers and how these requirements are changing. Each study is, however, broader than this, exploring aspects of training and recruitment, as well as any issues which are particularly relevant to individual occupations.

This report presents the findings of one of the first occupational studies: sales assistants.

1.2 Aims and objectives

Each occupational study addresses a number of common research questions:

- What is the nature of skill requirements for the occupation?
- Have the nature and level of skill requirements changed? Are the skill requirements increasing or decreasing? Are 'new' skills emerging and some 'older' skills disappearing?
- Which sorts of skill requirements are increasing and which are decreasing? Which are emerging and which are disappearing?

- Have the skill levels of the workforce changed to accommodate these changes? Or, have there been improvements in the supply of skills that have encouraged increasing skill requirements in jobs?
- Are the skill requirements for occupations likely to carry on increasing or decreasing? Do employers view change as a continuing trend?
- How can changes in skill requirements within occupations be measured?

1.3 Research methodology

There were four threads to the study of sales assistants:

- a search of existing literature
- a preliminary stage of exploratory interviews
- a series of interviews with employers
- a seminar discussing our findings and conclusions.

1.3.1 Exploratory interviews

Before designing the discussion guide and conducting interviews with employers, a small number of exploratory interviews were conducted with key contacts concerned with the skills and training of sales assistants. Discussions were held with a representative of the Distributive Occupational Standards Council (DOSC) and the National Retailing Training Council (NRTC).

DOSC is one of many Occupational Standards Councils. It is responsible for bringing together a range of bodies concerned with the distributive industries, of which retailing is one, to ensure that appropriate NVQ frameworks are developed and implemented. The NRTC is the Industry Training Organisation (ITO) for retailing, and is involved in the development of training in the sector.

Contact was also made with the DfEE official responsible for this occupational area, and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW).

These exploratory interviews had a number of functions:

- to inform them about the study, gain their interest, general views and support
- to identify any research they had conducted, were planning to conduct or were aware of
- to increase our understanding and knowledge of the occupational area, the key skill and training issues, and the relevant occupational standards.

In particular, we wanted to ensure that we were familiar with existing skill and occupational frameworks, and any current or emerging issues relating to the occupation. The information was used to inform the research generally and help in designing the discussion guide: in particular, our exploration of employers' skill needs. It should be stressed that this study was not aiming to test or confirm the NVQ occupational standards in any way, but rather to explore employers' skill requirements and how these were being met.

1.3.2 Employer interviews

The main stage of the research involved in-depth interviews with a number of employers. We were aiming for a total of 20 employer interviews and conducted 19. Four of these employers had expressed general interest in the overall research programme, and the rest had been invited to participate in this particular study. Four organisations contacted refused to participate, usually because of a lack of time. A further two were still being followed up when we had to close the interviewing.

The interviews were mostly conducted at head office level, and usually with a training or personnel manager, sometimes both. In a few cases, we interviewed a regional training manager. The majority of these respondents had responsibility for the recruitment, training and skill development of sales assistants, but a number had broader responsibilities, for example, for management skills or other areas of personnel. Most interviews lasted between one, and one and a half hours.

The discussion guide

A discussion guide was developed to provide the basic structure for each occupational study. This was piloted in the first few interviews. As anticipated, the guide was too long, and some

areas had to receive less focus than originally planned. It was initially decided to reduce the coverage of recruitment and internal movement. However, in the end, these topics were covered and less detailed information was collected on the characteristics of the occupation, including numbers employed and terms and conditions.

The discussion guide covered:

- background about the company
- the place of sales assistants in the company
- changes affecting the company in general, and sales assistants in particular
- the skills and abilities required of sales assistants, and how these were changing
- how these skills and abilities were identified and measured
- external recruitment
- internal movement, and training and development
- key issues for the future.

The majority of interviews were conducted between December 1995 and mid-February 1996.

The sample

This occupational study is probably the only one which focuses entirely on a single industry. All the interviews were conducted with retailing organisations. Nineteen interviews can in no way be representative, but we tried to ensure that companies selling a range of different types of products, and occupying varying market positions, were included. The majority of interviews were in large, national retailing organisations, although a small organisation operating in one region, a chain of convenience stores, and a home delivery service were also included. We had most difficult persuading organisations which are normally seen as operating towards the discount end of the market to participate, but did include some coverage of these.

The findings presented in this report can not be taken as entirely representative of the skills required of and training provided for sales assistants. There are many small employers in retailing, and others operating at very low costs where, no

doubt, conditions and requirements are very different. Nevertheless, the organisations participating in this study were employing large numbers of people. Furthermore, the broad themes emerging are fairly consistent, and there was much evidence of change and movement in a similar direction, in particular, for example, an emphasis on customer service and concern with training.

1.3.3 Discussion of the findings

A copy of the draft report was sent to everyone who participated in the study, with an invitation to attend a seminar to discuss and review the findings. This seminar was eventually arranged around five months after the interviewing was completed, since too few people had been able to attend the first suggested date. This discussion was interesting, and helpful in revising the report. What was perhaps particularly interesting was the extent to which a different emphasis was placed on some issues at this time, compared to when the interviews were conducted. This seemed to indicate a fast rate of change in some areas; retail organisations constantly have to keep up with the competition and with consumer expectations and demands.

1.4 Structure of the report

The rest of this draft report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides some basic background information about the retailing industry and the structure of employment. It goes on to explore various aspects of the culture and competitive strengths that were reported to characterise the organisations participating in this study.
- Chapter 3 explores employers' skill requirements and how these are changing.
- Chapter 4 looks at how employers attempt to measure and assess skills.
- Chapter 5 reports the extent of recruitment difficulties and skills gaps.
- Chapter 6 explores the provision of training.
- Finally, Chapter 7 looks at some future concerns and draws some conclusions.

2. The Retailing Industry and Sales Occupations

2.1 Introduction

The National Retail Training Council publishes detailed analyses of the retail labour market (for example, NRTC, 1995), and an earlier IMS report (Toye *et al.*, 1993) explored the structure and character of the British retailing industry. This report does not, therefore, provide a detailed description of the industry and employment within it. The first section of this chapter provides a summary of some of the main points emerging from the reports mentioned above, and briefly outlines some overall employment trends in the organisations participating in this study.

Later sections explore the different cultures and competitive strengths of these organisations and the nature and impact of changes affecting them. This sets the background for our examination of employers' skill requirements and, in particular, the ways in which these are changing. There are a number of broad themes which were common to most organisations, regardless of the sector of the market in which they operate or the main product(s) they sell. These are detailed below and include the role of technological change, competitive pressures, an emphasis on customer service and generally meeting consumer demand.

2.2 Trends in employment

Overall levels of employment

There are a large number of single site retailers, but the industry is dominated by large businesses. According to the National Retail Training Council (1995), multiples with more than 100 sites

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represent less than one per cent of retail businesses but account for 46 per cent of retail employment and over half of turnover. Food retailing accounts for 27 per cent of retail businesses and 37 per cent of retail employment.

The majority of organisations participating in this study were large businesses and had stores distributed across the country. One was regionally based and another in one locality, although this was a new company and there were plans to expand. The size of individual stores within these organisations varied considerably. In some, all stores were large. In others, the size varied depending on their location and the size of the market they were serving.

Some organisations were expanding in terms of the number employed. This was almost entirely through the opening of new sites, rather than increasing staff levels in existing stores. A theme emerging from most of the interviews was the tight control being kept on costs and staffing numbers. Existing stores were expected to deal with similar levels of business with fewer staff, and any growth in sales had to be catered for with similar numbers of staff. Technology had enabled some reductions in staff levels, although the main impact of technological change was usually a few years ago. In a number of stores, a layer of management had been removed and in some, the hierarchy was very flat. Staff at all levels were being expected to do more, and take on a wider range of responsibilities.

Part-time work

The retail industry is a major employer of part-time staff. According to the NRTC (1995), 48 per cent of retailing employment is part time and 80 per cent of part time workers are women. These data relate to the industry generally, and larger proportions of sales assistants work part time. Between 1984 and 1994, the retail sector experienced a major growth in part-time work (Naylor, 1994), an increase of 63 per cent. Some of this was due to a growth in jobs, but the same study reported a fall in full-time jobs over the decade.

The organisations involved in this study varied in the proportions of full and part-time sales assistants employed. In one, 99 per cent of employment was part-time and this had been the case since 1976. Most other organisations had between one-third and

one-quarter of sales assistants working full time and, in a few cases, the move towards part-time employment had been fairly recent.

Although there was a general movement towards an increase in the proportion of sales assistants working part time, there were a number of different influences at work. Most organisations had a range of different weekly contract hours, for example, four hours (Saturday and Sunday only); 12 hours (the main contract) and 18 to 22 hours. In some, the trend was towards a greater emphasis on part-time and fewer hours, linking staffing levels more closely to peaks and troughs in customer demand. One means of keeping staff costs under control was the closer alignment of staff hours to levels of customer demand: *'We are more creative and flexible in terms of hours.'*

Longer opening hours, daily and weekly, were also creating pressures for more part-time shifts. It was argued that customer service requires people to be fresh. For example, supermarket staff can become stale if they spend too long on the checkout.

In other organisations, the move towards more part-time work was being tempered. For example, it was reported that small numbers of hours could not provide people with sufficient earnings, and flexing hours up helped to reduce staff turnover. There was also a feeling that continuity of service was important. Having too many people working very short hours had not been found to provide the best customer service.

The employment of women

Women make up 62 per cent of all employment in the retail industry, but a much higher proportion of sales assistants (NRTC, 1995). Although the proportion of female managers is increasing, men still predominate at this level.

The organisations in this study were no exceptions to this pattern. The majority of sales assistants, in nearly all cases, were women, except in a DIY and electrical store, where the products are traditionally associated with male interests and activities. Furthermore, although most respondents reported that men continued to dominate management posts this was beginning to change. Indeed, in some organisations measures were being taken to ensure that women, whether working full or part time, were given opportunities to progress to managerial positions.

The use of temporary workers

Most retailing organisations use some temporary workers, especially at Christmas, but also during other holiday periods. The use of temporary workers at Christmas has become more closely related to shopping patterns. Whereas in the past many stores began taking on temporary staff some months before the main rush began, the build up is now much closer to Christmas, and the running down of numbers happens more quickly afterwards.

A number of organisations, and this was particularly common amongst the supermarkets, rely heavily on students. For example, one respondent talked about using students studying at local institutions during term time and those returning home during the holidays. They were particularly useful as a number of permanent sales assistants, usually women, want or need to take time off or work differently during the school holidays.

Temporary work was sometimes a way into permanent work. This was not a matter of course and did depend on the existence of vacancies, furthermore it was a more common route into some organisations than others. The main advantage was that the suitability of applicants could be assessed before any permanent contract was offered.

2.3 Culture and competitive strengths

As a background to employers' skill requirements, we briefly explored the culture and perceived competitive strengths of the organisations participating in this study. A range of different approaches, cultures and competitive strengths were reported. However, a number of common themes emerge, in particular, the importance of those working on the 'front line' (usually the sales assistants), the importance of customers, and the extent of pressures for change.

2.3.1 Customer service

Customer service was reported to be key to all the organisations, and this took a number of forms. 'Value for money' and competitive pricing were mentioned as important to the competitive strength of several organisations. The phrase 'never knowingly undersold' is well known. However, many organi-

sations operate a similar policy. One department store respondent commented:

> *'Prices are prices and we are selling pretty much the same goods.'*

The overall importance of price cannot be ignored. Some stores concentrate on their reputation for discount goods and cheapness. However, this was often reported to be no longer enough. Indeed, several of the organisations we had selected for interview due to their reputation for catering for the discount end of the market, were reassessing their market position and moving upmarket.

Product strategies may also vary, in an attempt to meet different types of demands and concerns. For example, some organisations emphasise quality rather than price alone, others emphasise being environmentally friendly. Several respondents talked about the range of products provided, whether within a specialist market or more generally. For example, one talked about being a family retailer and providing a 'family experience', catering for a wide range of clothing needs.

The quality of the service provided by staff was a central concern to most participating organisations, and this theme is returned to in later chapters. For example, respondents talked about aiming to be 'the best' or 'the foremost in customer service'. It was frequently difficult to tease out the exact differences in approach between organisations, and what actually makes any retail organisation the best. It is, however, likely that different styles of service suit different customers.

Rather than being very prescriptive, laying down an exact style which the customer service should follow, most organisations had a general aim, for example:

> *'The customer should leave happy in the knowledge that they have bought the product which is right for them, these have not been forced on them, and they have been given the opportunity to make a choice.'*

> *'To serve and greet customers as well as carry out activities and procedures within a designated area of the store.'*

Some respondents talked about exceeding customer expectations: 'going that bit further', 'the last mile for the customer'. This might be, for example, in terms of product knowledge, obtaining

products not on the shop floor or in stock, arranging deliveries or going beyond the Exchange of Goods Act.

This concern with customer service has important implications for the expectations and requirements placed on sales assistants. There was more reliance on the personal and inter-personal skills of sales assistants. Some elements of customer service are less directly related to the skills of sales assistants, but still have implications for the ways in which they operate. For example, an organisation running a chain of convenience stores aimed for neighbourliness and being part of the community. This has implications for the ways in which staff operate and relate to customers. These stores were providing everyday and 'top-up' shopping, not aiming to compete directly with the large supermarkets in the types of products supplied or on price.

A number of additional services and facilities were being provided to attract customers and add to the quality of the service. In some cases, these added little long-term competitive edge as other similar stores soon catch up. For example, virtually all the large supermarkets now provide 'parent and child parking' and open extra till points if more than a certain number of people are waiting. However, not all services were the same. Some stores were experimenting with different types of facility, while others found that some things suited their customers, which might not suit others. For example, one supermarket chain was very keen on the loyalty card. Not only did this give regular customers a discount, but it provided the company with much useful customer information. This enabled marketing to be focused, for example, through particular groups being targeted when new products were introduced and following-up customers who had transferred their custom elsewhere.

Companies were increasingly looking for facilities and attractions which might increase sales and appeal to customers. A number of ideas from the United States were being examined, although not all were felt to be appropriate to the British culture. One chain of department stores was introducing Personal Shopping Suites. These are a lounge, providing tea and coffee, large fitting rooms, and other facilities. They aim to cater for busy people who do not want, or have time, to browse, or those who want a more personal or leisurely type of service. An appointment is made with a Personal Shopping Consultant who will bring together a selection of items which meet the customer's require-

ments, for example, a dress or suit and various accessories, for them to try on, without any pressure to buy. Gold Card lounges were also being provided for high spending store card holders, and 'superloos'.

2.3.2 Strength as an employer

The majority of respondents talked about the importance of the organisation being a good employer. Sales assistants were often referred to as 'front-line' staff and it was reported that companies are increasingly conscious of the importance of these staff:

> *'We look after our staff and they look after the customers.'*
>
> *'People (ie customers and staff) should be the first consideration in every business decision.'*

Working as a sales assistant has traditionally been seen as a low status, rather dead end job, and something young people with no qualifications enter. In parts of the market, this continues to be the case, but several respondents discussed their desire to see the status of sales assistants raised, to get away from the attitude 'I am just a sales assistant', 'I just work behind a till'. One respondent talked about the effort being put into raising the self-esteem and confidence of sales assistants in the company, trying to make them realise and accept that they had an important role to play, and that they do have skills and indeed valuable ones. Other respondents talked about recognition, responsibility, empowerment, and the increasing expectations being placed on sales assistants. These are themes to which we will return in later chapters.

We did not explore in much detail the pay, terms and conditions offered to sales assistants. Pay rates did vary. A few organisations were reported to be high payers, paying towards the upper end of the range, others were medium or low payers. The pay of some sales assistants had an element related to performance or was, at least in part, based on commission. A few respondents reported that the company would like to, or should, pay more but was constrained by competitive pressures and the need to make profits. There does appear to be a tension here, the job of a sales assistant is not traditionally well paid, yet the expectations being placed on sales assistants are growing and it is argued increasingly to be a skilled occupation. The relatively small number of hours worked by some sales assistants complicates

the picture. Some respondents reported that it was not pay rates *per se* which were an issue but the number of hours worked. In one case, for example, a company was trying to ensure that staff were guaranteed a minimum number of hours and that hours were always flexed up, never down.

2.4 The nature and impact of change

The retail sector has experienced considerable change in recent years, and the pace and impact of change continues to play an important role, influencing the nature of the industry and the skills required. This section identifies the main changes affecting the organisations participating in this study.

2.4.1 Technology

The influence of technological change and, in particular, information technology has been well documented in a number of studies (for example, Jarvis and Prais, 1989; Spilsbury *et al.*, 1993; Toye *et al.*, 1993). Although it emerged as an issue in this study, and is likely to have an on-going impact on both the industry and the skills required of people working in it, it did not seem to be having as major an impact as in the past. A few organisations had only recently computerised their operations or were in the process of doing so, but for the majority, the major technological changes had taken place a few years ago. Most current change is incremental and evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Technological change has affected many aspects of the retail industry, and the skills required of those working in it. In particular, it has affected those operating the tills, and the methods of stock control. Many different methods of payment are acceptable, and organisations have to keep up to date. In particular, technology has provided more information about customers and increased the speed with which those on the checkouts have to work, for example. Some organisations use information on trading patterns to design the staffing for the store. This enables staffing levels to be very much more closely and efficiently matched to variations in volumes of sales. However, it can also reduce the hours for which people are needed and put other pressures on staff and management.

Most stores computerised their stock taking and stock ordering systems some years ago. A few were still doing so. However, there is now much more information readily available about purchasing patterns. This changes the skills required of sales assistants, although it is not clear whether these requirements can truly be described as upskilling or deskilling.

2.4.2 Competitive pressures

Competition is increasing. Consumers do not necessarily have the amounts of money they used to and/or are more careful in their spending. However, they are more demanding and discerning. People are more likely to know their rights, and want information and advice, and possibly expertise about the products they are considering buying. In some markets, the nature of demand is changing. For example, it was reported that there is a much greater range of toys: children have more sophisticated tastes and seem to grow up more quickly. All these demands and expectations have to be addressed to keep up with the competition.

Many organisations are diversifying into broader areas. For example, supermarkets increasingly provide a broader range of products traditionally bought from a High Street chemist, and 'environmentally friendly' products are no longer only sold from a small number of specialist outlets. Pricing is more competitive. Retail organisations have to be constantly looking at how they can get ahead, or keep ahead, following customer spending power and the latest ideas in customer service.

Several of the organisations were introducing major change programmes. In some cases, this was in response to a fall in performance and/or profit, in others attempts were being made to move the organisation forward and keep ahead of the competition. All these programmes involved a major change in the expectations placed on staff, in particular, a move towards an emphasis on customer service and selling.

2.4.3 Emphasis on customer service

Closely related to the above changes, is greater emphasis on customer service in the day to day operation of retailing organisations. This has had a major impact on the expectations placed on sales assistants (see Chapter 3). Increasingly, sales

assistants are expected to relate to and interact with customers, rather than focus on the look of the store and 'housekeeping'. This is not a new trend within the retail industry (see, for example, Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1988; Doogan, 1992; Scott, 1994 and Toye *et al.*, 1993), but did emerge as an important theme in this study.

2.4.4 Changing working practices

Respondents talked about delayering, becoming leaner, working smarter, breaking down vested interests and removing demarcations. In particular, efforts were being made to keep costs under control and generally increase efficiency. The number of managers had been reduced in many organisations and, in some, layers of management had been removed altogether. Any increase in business almost always had to be catered for within existing staffing levels and, as described above, technological advances are enabling staffing levels to be more closely related to trading patterns. All these changes have implications for the responsibilities of, and pressures on, those staff remaining, and the skills and abilities expected of them.

2.4.5 Finding new locations, meeting new demands

There are now very few out-of-town sites available for new stores, and supermarkets in particular are having to look at new ways of expanding and meeting consumer demands. Car parking is of key importance and something to which customers expect or prefer to have access. Many of the organisations in this study were only expanding slowly, if at all, to new sites; others were looking for large numbers of new opportunities. The chain of convenience stores was expanding very rapidly, largely through taking over existing stores. Other types of business were looking at alternative ways of expanding their operations. For example, some supermarkets were returning to town and city centres, through opening smaller outlets catering for different types of demands to the large out-of-town superstores. Several other organisations were revamping their stores, either to attract a different type of customer compared to the past, or to cater for a wider variety of customers.

2.4.6 The extension of trading hours

Consumers increasingly expect to be able to shop when they want to, and late evening shopping and Sunday opening are placing greater demands on the retail industry. This has implications for the expectations placed on sales assistants and their managers. None of the companies in this study were forcing their staff to work on Sundays. A few had mainly Sunday only teams, others were not keen on this option. Sunday and late night trading has implications for the provision of training, the hours staff work, and the continuity of service, all of which are of concern to the companies.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has provided a brief background to our detailed examination of the skills required of sales assistants. In particular, it explored the pressures for change experienced by retail organisations, and respondents' views of their competitive strengths. Price is one element on which stores compete, but it is frequently not enough to be the cheapest. Different customers demand varying types of service and products, and they are beginning to expect more. All these demands and expectations need to be addressed and met. Competition is strong, and retailing organisations are always attempting to introduce changes which give them an edge on their direct competitors. Some of the changes made were technological, or related to the location or physical environment of stores. However, in all our interviews respondents focused their emphasis on the quality of their customer service and hence their sales assistants.

3. The Skills Required of Sales Assistants

3.1 Introduction

One of the main aims of this study was to explore the skills required by employers of sales assistants, and how these skill requirements are changing. This chapter addresses these issues. The term 'skill' is used in its broadest sense here. The literature classifies skill in a number of ways. Distinctions are frequently made between technical skills required for a job; social and behavioural or personal skills (directly required for a job and/or needed for people to work together effectively); and basic skills (*ie* literacy and numeracy). Cutting across these distinctions are the divisions of skills into those required specifically, for an occupation or by a particular employer, and those which are transferable between occupations and employers. The relative importance of these different types of skill vary between occupations and employers.

A fairly consistent picture of skill requirements for sales assistants emerges from this study. The main emphasis was on personal skills or attributes. The technical skills of selling and working in a retail environment were generally argued to be easily acquired or 'trained in'. Different retailing organisations did express some specific requirements, or were looking for people who would fit in with their own particular culture. However, many of the skills appear to be broadly transferable between organisations. This study was not aiming to test or evaluate the NVQ occupational standards for retail operations, although the skills described were closely related to these frameworks.

3.2 Basic skills

Literacy and numeracy were required for all sales assistant jobs. People who are 'reasonably intelligent' or 'fairly bright' were

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looked for. Sometimes literacy and numeracy tests were used in the recruitment process and, in some cases, mathematics and English GCSEs/'O' Levels were used as indicators. However, in many cases, there did not appear to be any formal assessment of these abilities.

There was some variation in the perceived importance of numeracy skills. Arguments could be put forward for both an increased and reduced need for numeracy in the work of sales assistants. The till now calculates how much change is required in a transaction, and the main requirement is for assistants to be able to count out the change. However, in some jobs, for example in a convenience store, assistants may be required to cash up at the end of their shift. In others, changing methods of stocking the store means that employees need to be able to read computer spreadsheets, for example. The type of numeracy skills required are changing but, for most jobs, sales assistants need to be able to use numbers. Respondents to this study did report a certain level of difficulty amongst both sales assistants and those in managerial positions.

Other studies have also emphasised the importance of literacy and numeracy (for example, Doogan, 1992; Spilsbury *et al.*, 1993), and there have been a number of press reports about large retailers curtailing their recruitment of teenagers due to a lack of basic skills (Authers, 1993; Kelly, 1993 and Passmore, 1993).

3.3 Personal skills

The most important skills required of sales assistants, and these were focused on in the recruitment process, were personal, social and behavioural skills or attributes. It was frequently argued that, if people with the necessary personal attributes were employed, the technical selling skills could relatively easily be added on:

> *'Retailing is very straightforward as long as you are literate and have the necessary communication skills, personality, and fit in with the team — it is attitude and outlook which is most important.'*

The key attributes sought were a desire to work and be with people, and a desire to sell and provide service. Customers were expected to come first and their expectations should be met or exceeded. Those working as sales assistants were expected to

have or adopt this type of outlook. These attributes are focused through attention to customer service and selling skills which are discussed below. This section details the types of personal attributes or skills sought.

A long list of personal attributes emerged from the interviews. There were variations in the words used and in emphasis, but respondents to this study were generally looking for similar types of people:

> *'Clean, smile, pleasant, polite manner, good eye contact.'*
>
> *'Professionalism (ie* not bringing outside commitments to work), *commitment, energy, strong communication skills.'*
>
> *'Friendly, a pleasant personality.'*
>
> *'Nice people (who say please, thank you and smile), pleasant, polite, enjoy interacting with people.'*
>
> *'Friendly, motivated, want to learn, communication skills, common sense.'*
>
> *'Flexibility, good communication skills, team working, ability to learn and desire to keep on learning.'*
>
> *'A bit of a spark, personality.'*

Interpersonal and communication skills were of vital importance. Sales assistants need to be able to talk to and relate to customers, not perhaps on a very detailed level, but at least in a general way.

Personal and behavioural attributes have long been important in retailing and a focus in the recruitment process. This has been detailed in a number of other studies (for example, Casey, 1994; Spilsbury *et al.*, 1993; Toye *et al.*, 1993). However, with the increasing emphasis on service and selling, these attributes are becoming more necessary and there appears to be a stronger focus on how potential recruits relate to and deal with people.

3.4 Customer service skills

Customer service skills are very closely related to the personal and social skills of employees. A certain attitude and outlook was argued to be necessary for people to be able to provide the appropriate level of customer service. Customer service was

important to all the organisations in this study, and many respondents talked about the level of customer service provided being their competitive strength. It was often difficult to establish exactly what was different about an individual organisation's approach to customer service. Although they were not all adopting the same approach, the approaches adopted did appear to range along a continuum:

- only acknowledging the customer's presence if they ask for help
- smiling, saying hello, acknowledging the customer's presence but not specifically offering help, waiting to be asked
- acknowledging the customer's presence and offering help, but not taking this further unless actively encouraged
- actively trying to offer help, even if the customer does not really want any.

Most organisations were aiming for the second or third of these positions. Some were reputed to take the fourth approach, although this seems to be relatively rare in Britain. The first approach is more traditional in Britain, and many organisations are trying to move away from this.

The general theme was that customers come first, and their expectations should be met. At a minimum, a customer expects to have questions answered, whether about the location of something in a store, or a more detailed question about a specific product. Being courteous to customers, polite and friendly is part of this. Some respondents talked about sales assistants 'gossiping' with customers, gaining a rapport and encouraging return custom. Although the main reason behind this type of approach was to encourage customers, it could also be used, for example, as a means of obtaining information about customer preferences and their views of the store — information which could be used in developing future services.

Directing customers within a store is another important element of customer service. Most organisations wanted sales assistants, wherever possible, to take customers to the product they were looking for, rather than pointing or explaining how to get there. This was not always possible, for example, in large stores, in which case customers should be accompanied for part of the way. This type of approach was argued to have an effect psychologically, making people feel cared for. Another element of

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directing is the way people point — rather than pointing with a finger, a rounded hand makes a better impression, for example.

Although the organisations had different approaches to customer service, most were not trying to place employees in a straitjacket. It was generally recognised that both customers and sales assistants are individuals and are comfortable with different types of approach. Employees were provided with the basic tools, information on the principles of customer service and expected to develop from there. For example, in one organisation it used to be expected that certain till speeds should be maintained. This is no longer the case, it is now felt more appropriate that the customer should be dealt with at a speed both felt comfortable with. Some customers want to talk, others want to get away as soon as possible.

The most important of these tools was recognising different types of customer behaviour, reading the signs, and approaching customers accordingly. One respondent used an analogy to traffic lights:

- *green* — a customer who wants to buy and leave quickly, the assistant needs to efficient, polite and speedy
- *amber* — a customer who might buy if treated properly and encouraged appropriately
- *red* — someone who is browsing to pass the time, does not want to buy but will stop to chat, a responsive sales assistant might encourage future business.

A number of examples were given of employees going that bit further to serve their customers. For example, in paying special attention to the ordering of out-of-stock products and arranging delivery.

3.5 Selling skills

Selling skills are closely related to personal and customer service skills. They require certain behavioural characteristics and an understanding of the principles of customer service. However, they provide an additional dimension, and could arguably be one of the few specialist skills required of sales assistants. Selling skills require an understanding of the processes through which people go in making a decision, about human behaviour and body language, for example.

There are a number of basic steps to selling, in which most organisations were training their sales assistants. There was some variation in the emphasis placed on different elements or in the approach taken by the organisations. For example, some organisations place more emphasis on reading signals, others on trying to make sure customers make a decision before leaving the store, rather than going away to think about things. Differences in the approach to selling relate closely to the approach taken to customer service.

The main elements of selling include:

- breaking down the barriers/acknowledging the customer — for example, smiling, saying hello, getting into conversation
- reading the signals — is the customer likely to buy? Do they need or want help?
- identifying the need — questioning the customer (*eg* are they looking for something for themselves or a present? How much money do they have to spend?), understanding body language and the use of words
- summarising
- advising, offering options
- allowing the customer to select
- offering add-ons — accessories if applicable
- closing the sale, including taking to the till point.

The organisations participating in this study were not aiming for a 'hard sell' approach. Indeed, there was much discussion of the difficulties of adopting a selling approach in Britain compared, for example, to America. In general, the British do not like to be sold to, or to sell. However, sales assistants are being required to become more skilled in selling in many retailing organisations. For example, some respondents reported that, in the past, there had been a tendency for customers to leave confused and not having made a decision to buy, with a potential sale probably lost to another company.

3.6 Technology

Technology did not emerge as such a major issue in this study as we expected from our review of the literature. It was reported earlier that, for most organisations, the main period of technological change was a few years ago. A few were catching up.

Technology will continue to change and develop, although it was not anticipated that any major new skill needs will emerge.

As a result of the impact of technology, most retailing organisations require staff at all levels to have a basic level of computer literacy, or at least not to be afraid of acquiring it. This was seen as more of an issue a few years ago, when people were less familiar with technology. Computers and related equipment are now a feature of everyday life. The skills needed of sales assistants were usually very basic. Most of the pieces of computer technology used in stores have been designed to be very user friendly. Those using tills, for example, are taken through the steps needed to make each transaction. Furthermore, as one respondent reported, when new features or pieces of equipment are introduced, experienced systems staff adapt them to be as user friendly as possible from the outset.

The advent of information technology and other computer applications in retail stores has led to different skills being required of sales assistants. However, it is often the case that employees need more knowledge, or to be instructed in different tasks, rather than having to acquire new skills. For example, sales assistants operating tills need to be aware of the many different methods of payment and how to administer each. It was also argued that these technologies require different types of numerical skills, for example, the ability to read and understand spreadsheets and computer printed stock reports.

3.7 Product knowledge

Selling and providing customer service require a level of product knowledge. The ability to acquire this knowledge and, usually, an interest in the products, was required of sales assistants, although it was argued that people 'don't need to know a lot about products to be a good sales person'. At a general level, assistants need basic knowledge about the store in which they work and what it sells. The normal expectation is that sales assistants will take customers to the product they are looking for, even if this is not within their own area of responsibility. Once there, customers frequently want some information. Sometimes, it is expected that sales assistants will be able to deal, at a basic level, with any queries. More often, they need to know how to find out the answer to questions, or who to refer the customer on to.

Products are frequently up-dated and changed and new seasonal ranges are introduced. Therefore, there has to be a balance between detailed and more general product knowledge. One respondent reported that they had, in the past, provided their sales assistants with high levels of product knowledge, but had found that this did not work. Staff tended either to try to tell customers too much, or were frightened to say anything in case they got something wrong, or omitted to include an important piece of information. An electrical store preferred sales assistants with some knowledge of computers, rather than a deep knowledge. It was argued that they were better able to relate to customers and reassure them that the necessary knowledge could be easily acquired or discovered, rather than confuse them with detail.

In most retail stores, the aim was that sales assistants should have enough information about the products they were selling, and know where to go for further information. In some circumstances, there was a need for specialist knowledge, although this was frequently not about individual products but rather about the types of products being sold and related information. For example, in a chain of department stores, sales assistants were kept informed about different types of fabric and the characteristics of these. In an organisation specialising in beauty products, assistants were expected to build up knowledge about the type of products sold, rather than the specific products which can change quickly, and about skin and hair types. Staff selling domestic electrical goods need to know and understand about guarantees and the various additional warranties offered by the store.

It was reported that customers are more demanding and require more information. Some of this can be provided through the use of labels and leaflets. For example, the convenience stores could not recruit or train specialist staff with expert knowledge, and relied on the use of leaflets. Sales assistants in supermarkets may need to be able to acquire a different type of specialist knowledge. For example, customers might want to know how to use certain foods, which wines to serve with certain meats or fish, for example. The home delivery company had a number of telephone sales staff who were able to talk customers through possible menus.

3.8 The law and other regulations

This is not, perhaps, a skill but an area of knowledge which sales assistants are expected to acquire. Health and safety, security and various legal requirements operate in all retail stores, and all staff need to be able to apply and work within the necessary rules and regulations. Some organisations have more rules than others.

Refund policies, and the Exchange of Goods Act, were the examples used in many of our interviews. Sales assistants need to have knowledge of, and understand, the Exchange of Goods Act, but a number of retail organisations go beyond this. One respondent, for example, talked about their refund policy being a bit of a battleground. The organisation has a refund policy but many sales assistants will not easily give refunds, even though once the case is put to a manager, the refund will be allowed. The increasing responsibilities being placed on sales assistants is discussed further below.

Accurate knowledge on the legal and company rules and regulations is a further aspect of customer service. However, it is an area in which increasing onus is being placed on sales assistants.

3.9 Other skills or abilities sought of sales assistants

3.9.1 Using the telephone

The direct delivery organisation had the greatest need for people with telephone skills. Most of these were, however, an extension of general customer service and selling skills. Nevertheless, this is likely to be an important function in the retailing industry of the future. In the United States, a growing number of households have their groceries and other basic, functional goods delivered. This is not widespread in Britain but it is anticipated that there may be a move in this direction.

In major retailing organisations, there is an increasing amount of contact between customers and sales assistants by telephone. Customers might telephone to check on stock and opening hours, for example, and many stores will now take orders over the telephone. A number of respondents reported that the telephone skills of sales assistants had been, or were being, enhanced. Being

polite over the telephone and answering direct questions was not enough. Sales assistants are expected to provide additional information, for example, about home deliveries and the procedures associated with these.

3.9.2 Merchandising and housekeeping

These received far less emphasis than many other areas in our discussions of employers' skill needs. However, they are still part of the job of many sales assistants and are included in the NVQ frameworks. There was often less emphasis on these areas compared to those abilities relating to dealing with customers. Nevertheless, one aspect of good customer service is keeping a store clean, tidy and well stocked. In some stores, the main concern with these issues has been moved 'out of hours'. Sales assistants do, however, have to maintain stock and appearances during the day. At the seminar to discuss the findings of this study, several respondents reported a shift back towards more shelf filling being done during the day. Customers do not like to see too many sales assistants standing around, and this is one way of occupying them while they remain available to answer any queries.

In some stores, assistants are responsible for particular aisles or areas and have to make sure these are well maintained. Respondents also talked about merchandising and the need for sales assistants to be aware of the main principles. This did, however, appear to be the main responsibility of people at a level above sales assistants, *ie* supervisors and line managers.

3.9.3 Other skills and knowledge

A wide range of other skills and knowledge were mentioned in relation to particular types of retailing or specific products. For example, staffing fitting rooms, wrapping goods, arranging deliveries, and specialist knowledge or expertise (fitting bras or children's shoes, and selling electrical goods were most frequently referred to).

3.10 Taking responsibility and sharing initiative

Sales assistants are, in most organisations, frequently expected to take greater responsibility for many areas of their work. They

are expected to be flexible, willing to adapt to change, make decisions, take initiative and take some responsibility for their own learning and development. Many respondents described how decision-making over a range of issues has been devolved to the lowest level. Sales assistants are expected to make decisions about refunds and discounts, for example, on their own, without referring to a manager. This was one element of possible conflict. Respondents also reported that many sales assistants appear reluctant to take on these responsibilities. This study only collected information from employers, and it would be useful to understand more about how sales assistants feel about these issues. A study of four large supermarkets in the 1980s suggested that sales assistants were not fully taking on board the cultural changes being introduced, although they were changing their behaviour (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1988; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990).

Sales assistants were also expected to be flexible, covering different jobs or tasks as needed, and to show initiative in doing this. It was also frequently expected, as part of the emphasis on customer service, for sales assistants to deal with any problems they notice themselves, or to make sure someone else dealt with them. For example, in a supermarket, it was expected that everyone would be prepared to deal with breakages and spillages without being told, even if these were not in their direct area of responsibility.

3.11 Changing skill requirements

The above discussion of skill needs has included a number of comments on changes in the skills required of sales assistants. This study focused on changes occurring in the last three years, and there is evidence of a shift away from a concern with technology as documented in the existing literature. In most of the organisations participating in this study, change in all areas was occurring slowly and incrementally. A few organisations were going through a major cultural shift. However, the themes tended to be similar, and these are detailed below.

3.11.1 Technology

There is a vast range of literature exploring the impact of technology on employment generally. Some of this relates

specifically to the retail industry. There is no doubt that technological change has had a major impact on retailing but in most organisations, the main impact was felt some years ago. A few are still catching up, but in most technology is now evolving and adapting relatively slowly.

Technological change has altered stock ordering in stores, and till points in particular. All staff now need to be computer literate, and numeracy is an increasing issue. Technology has also altered the nature of sales assistants' jobs and many of these changes have been discussed above. For example, in super-markets, stock is now largely re-ordered automatically as products are sold. In other stores, computerised tills recording what is sold have reduced the need for stock to be counted regularly.
Technological change has also increased the amount of information available (see also Toye *et al.*, 1993). This has affected the skills and abilities required of sales assistants, through, for example, providing them with more information to use; increasing the amount of information available on their performance; providing more information on trading patterns which impacts on the hours required of staff and the pressures on them.

3.11.2 A greater emphasis on customers and selling

Almost all sales assistants are being required to spend more time with customers, providing service and selling. Several respondents reported the introduction of a major cultural change in their organisation. For example, in one, attention had always been paid to having stock on the shelves and moving customers through the checkout as quickly as possible. To compete more effectively, this organisation was moving away from a focus on functional goods to an emphasis towards the luxury end of the market. This was requiring a major change in the skills and abilities of sales assistants. Personal and behavioural characteristics were of increasing importance, as was an emphasis on customer service and selling.

Other organisations were not going through such major change, but they were paying increasing attention to the customer service and selling skills of their staff. Several reported that some staff were finding this difficult to take on. They preferred the housekeeping aspects of their job, keeping the shelves stocked and tidy, rather than dealing with people.

This growing emphasis on 'people skills' was both contributing towards making greater demands on sales assistants and also reducing their choice. Dealing with people had become a major part of the job, whether they liked it or not. In the past, dealing with people was more of an option.

3.11.3 Fewer support staff behind the scenes

Retail organisations are operating in a more competitive environment, and keeping costs under control is vital. One element of this has been a reduction in the amount of administrative work conducted behind the scenes. For example, stock records are increasingly the responsibility of sales staff, and telephone queries are dealt with by sales assistants on the relevant section. These types of change, for example, place greater responsibilities on sales staff, require them to be able to understand and use complex computer printouts, and be able to answer customer queries over the telephone.

3.11.4 Changing methods of stock control and re-stocking

There have been a number of changes in the way stock is delivered to, or dealt with in, stores. These have implications for the skills required of sales assistants. The impact of technological change has already been discussed. In general, there is a reduced need to count stock regularly. Most supermarkets, for example, now have their own central distribution warehouses. Stock sold each day by a store is automatically re-ordered and delivered, normally that night. Much of the shelf-filling is now done out of hours, not by sales assistants, although this is not totally a redundant part of their job. When visiting a supermarket, one frequently sees stock being replenished.

Many other types of store no longer keep large volumes of stock on site, partly due to pressure of space but also to control costs. For example, in one clothing store, the delivery vans visit regularly and sales assistants are expected to take some responsibility in deciding which garments they need to re-stock.

3.11.5 Greater business and commercial awareness

Many stores are coping with the same levels of business and fewer staff; or growing business and a similar level of staff.

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Furthermore, sales assistants are the largest group of employees in any store and their role is central. It was frequently argued that they increasingly need to understand more about the business generally, including their place within it and the contribution they make. This was not only seen as increasing commitment, but also as helping to make them more effective in their job generally.

3.11.6 An increased pace of work and the need to take responsibility

The requirement for sales assistants to take responsibility and initiative have been discussed earlier. This was putting greater pressure on them. At the same time, the pace of work was argued to be increasing, as tight control is kept on costs and staffing levels. Respondents reported:

'Downtime is less than it was.'

'We are all having to work smarter.'

There was, however, reported to be a trade-off between doing things quickly and doing things efficiently. For example, in one organisation, it used to be expected that a certain speed should be maintained at the tills. There has recently been a move away from this expectation. Checkout operators are now expected to deal with the customer as an individual, so both feel comfortable. Some people want to talk, or need time to sort themselves out, others want to get away as quickly as possible.

3.12 Deskilling or reskilling?

There have been many debates in the literature about the extent to which there has been a mass deskilling of the workforce, largely as a result of technological change, but also due to changes in working practices and organisations. Sales jobs have been included in these debates, and at one time there was a strong belief that a large element of deskilling was going on, at least in some areas (see for example, Jarvis and Prais, 1989; Rolfe, 1990). Scott (1994) found that the amount of deskilling varied according to the how work was organised in individual stores.

It must be remembered that this study focused on large retailing organisations, although a range of different types of organisation

were included. However, the data collected do not indicate that the skills required of sales assistants are becoming narrower or lessening.

The overall message is that much more is being required of sales assistants:

'All retailers are expecting more of their staff.'

Some might argue that staff are being required to become more skilled, but there can be no doubt that the skills and abilities required are different and more varied.

The managers interviewed for this study reported:

'Sales jobs are becoming more skilled.'

'A wider range of skills and more flexibility of skills is required.'

'Different types of skills are required.'

'Jobs have become bigger and more interesting.'

The ways in which sales jobs have changed have been discussed above. However, in almost all jobs, staff are increasingly required to have a broader view of the business, be more prepared to deal directly with customers, and to sell. In some cases, there has been a reduction in shelf filling and housekeeping required of sales assistants, the bulk of these tasks having been moved out of hours. In others, sales assistants are still expected to do these things, but also pay more attention to individual customers. One manager reported, for example, that they sometimes send conflicting messages to their staff: an emphasis is placed on the importance of housekeeping and administration, and relating to the customers, when it is not really possible to do both properly. This point was emphasised at the seminar discussing the draft report.

In all stores, sales assistants were being expected to do more, take more responsibility, have greater 'people skills' and a broader range of knowledge. In some organisations, it was reported that a greater depth of knowledge was required, especially as customers are more demanding and questioning, and for selling certain types of products (for example, drugs and pharma-ceuticals, and some electrical equipment). In others, it was argued that less depth but a greater breadth of knowledge was required.

The term 'multi-skilling' has frequently been used in relation to retailing jobs (Dawson, 1983; Toye *et al.*, 1993) and was used a number of times during our interviews. To provide a more flexible service, both in terms of hours covered and coverage across a store, sales assistants need to be able to work in a variety of product areas, and the majority need to be able to operate the till. For example, in one supermarket, jobs in the stores were split between cashiers and general assistants, and there was a move to make all customer service assistants able to carry out a range of tasks.

3.13 Summary

This chapter has explored both employers' skill requirements, and how these are changing. These two topics were considered separately to address the main aims of this research, although this does mean that there has been an element of repetition.

The job of a sales assistant has traditionally been considered of low status and requiring relatively low levels of ability and skill. Our data strongly suggest that the role of a sales assistant is expanding. In the organisations participating in this study, almost all sales assistants were being required to take on a greater range of responsibilities and learn specific retailing skills. Retailing is a highly competitive business and all stores are constantly attempting to gain an edge in the sector of the market in which they operate. A key emphasis was on customer service, meeting and, where possible, exceeding the demands of customers.

Sales assistants were expected to:

- be literate and numerate, able to use numbers
- have strong personal skills, including an attitude and outlook which gave them a desire to work with and serve people
- provide good customer service, whether this involved simply letting customers know they were there if needed or giving focused attention
- be able to sell
- be computer literate
- know about the products they were selling and, more generally, about other products and services provided by the organisation
- pay attention to the physical environment of the store

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- take responsibility for a wide range of tasks and show initiative
- work harder, smarter and efficiently.

The greater attention being paid to the skills and abilities of sales assistants is further emphasised by the data on recruitment, appraisal, monitoring, and training and development discussed in the following chapters.

4. Indicators and Measures of Skill

4.1 Introduction

The skills and abilities of sales assistants are assessed in varying ways on recruitment, and through various methods of assessment and monitoring of the workforce. In most of the organisations participating in this study, the recruitment process was being formalised and becoming more demanding. This was very much in line with the types of skills required, and the increasing emphasis on personal characteristics and behaviour. This chapter looks at the indicators used to measure or explore the skills and abilities of potential recruits, and the various methods used to monitor the skills of the workforce more generally.

4.2 Recruitment

The key focus in the recruitment process was a candidate's personal and behavioural characteristics. It was generally felt that the technical skills of retailing could be 'trained in'. The basic personal and behavioural attributes sought have been described above. However, the key emphasis was on identifying recruits who liked people and dealing with people, especially within a retailing environment.

4.2.1 The use of qualifications

Academic qualifications were rarely used in the recruitment of sales assistants, except for some specialist positions. Sometimes GCSE or 'O' Level English or Maths were used as indicators of literacy or numeracy, or as an indicator of a general education. However, one respondent reported that these were only useful as indicators, rather than an absolute measure. A number of young people in sales occupations had entered through Saturday

and/or holiday work. They had usually started this before taking any qualifications, and were known to the store when they wanted to move on to more permanent or regular work. Qualifications were more likely to be expected of young people recruited as potential managers, for example. Some organisations did have more young people with qualifications. This was, however, reported to be a reflection of increasing levels of qualifications amongst school leavers, rather than any purposeful use of such qualifications in recruitment.

Vocational qualifications were virtually never used in recruiting sales assistants. Prior to the introduction of NVQs, there were no specific retailing qualifications at this level. Very few people currently have an NVQ in retailing. It was reported that as and when more applicants have such qualifications, they will be used in the recruitment process. They are, however, likely to remain only one of a number of indicators used.

4.2.2 The role of past experience

Past experience in retailing was only sometimes seen as an advantage. It did depend where this past experience came from, and some types of experience were viewed as a positive disadvantage. A few organisations preferred sales assistants who had not been trained, or had any experience of selling techniques and customer service which might be inferior to their own. Experience could, however, lead to a 'foot in the door', helping applicants to reach the interviewing stage.

4.2.3 The recruitment process

Sales assistants were recruited at store level. Most organisations had developed guidelines or tools for store managers to use in recruitment. Although all managers were trained, or being trained, in interview techniques, not all used them. In a few organisations the process was left almost entirely to these managers.

The tools and guidelines given to store managers varied between being very general to fairly prescriptive. In a few cases, various tests were used, but recruitment mostly relied on the assessment of candidates through an interview. One organisation, for example, relied on numerical and verbal reasoning tests and an interview. Candidates had to score well on all three to be

recruited. Experience within the company had shown that those scoring poorly on any one of these indicators did not get on well in the longer term. When recruiting a large number of staff, for example for the opening of a new store, team exercises were sometimes used. These might be fairly basic, but managers would be looking for those people who took the exercise seriously, and worked as team members, providing and seeking advice, for example. A supermarket was just starting to use role playing to assess the abilities of sales assistants. They also took potential recruits onto the shop floor for a period, and obtained customer feedback on their performance.

4.2.4 The recruitment interview

Interviews were sometimes assessing individuals against a formal set of competencies or profiles, and sometimes more informally, against a set of criteria describing desirable characteristics of sales assistants. Several respondents reported that managers generally have a feel for the types of behaviour and personal characteristics needed in a store and whether people have them or not. It was felt that 'gut feel' was rarely relied on, except perhaps in the final decision, when several candidates appeared equally suitable. One respondent did, however, report that despite the existence of a recruitment tool kit, managers usually relied on 'gut feel':

> *'. . . although having said that, most managers are highly attuned to the personal skills needed in stores, personalities who will get on, etc.'*

Personal characteristics were assessed generally throughout the interview. For example, were candidates friendly, able to communicate, smiling and able to maintain eye contact? The personnel manager of a company providing a telephone ordering direct delivery service had initially interviewed sales staff by telephone, to assess their voice and telephone manner.

Behavioural interviewing of some sort was widespread. In particular, managers attempted to assess whether applicants had an approach to people, customer service and selling which was seen as appropriate to the organisation in question. Managers usually had a series of questions, possibly scenarios, which they can use to assess an individual's approach. For example, questions might be asked of those with some experience about

how they have dealt with difficult customers in the past or how they have provided customer service. Those without any previous retailing experience would be asked to provide examples of their own experiences of good and poor customer service, and how these made them feel. Questions could also explore situations familiar to the candidate. 'Women returners', for example, might be asked questions related to running a household. Young people might be asked questions relating to their schooling or a leisure interest.

A theme running through many of the interviews was the extent to which the recruitment of sales assistants is becoming a more formal and structured process. Some organisations had interviewed in a structured way for many years, others had introduced this approach more recently, or were in the process of doing so. Several organisations had developed competency frameworks, or profiles, to which they recruited. A number of others were doing so or looking at the possibilities. These changes were all linked to the growing emphasis on the quality of sales assistants.

4.2.5 The use of tests

Psychometric and personality tests were widely used for recruiting managers, and a number of retail organisations were looking at psychometric tools for recruiting sales assistants. Huddart (1994) reported HMU's plans to introduce psychometric testing for recruits, to identify candidates with the most customer-friendly personalities. One organisation, for example, used a personality test which included a series of statements with which candidates had to say how much they agreed or disagreed. A consultancy had recently brought out a questionnaire which identifies customer service skills in individuals, and one organisation was looking at the potential offered by this. Another organisation was conducting a major piece of research exploring what makes a good sales assistant. It was hoped that this would lead to the development of appropriate aptitude tests. The overall thrust was an increasing emphasis on identifying appropriate personal and behaviour characteristics. Personnel departments were increasingly attempting to standardise the procedures adopted in assessing these characteristics, as well as identifying the procedures most likely to identify the right people.

These methods of assessing potential recruits applied to all sales assistants, whether working full or part time. There was some variation in the attention paid when recruiting temporary staff, for example, at Christmas. The emphasis was still on customer service, but most stores wanted people who could become productive quickly for a short period, and deal with large numbers of customers. As reported earlier, in some organisations, an important point of entry to permanent work is through a temporary job. Anyone wanting to move from temporary work to fill a permanent vacancy would often have to go through the full recruitment process, although being known to the store would usually give them an advantage.

4.3 Assessing and monitoring the skills of the workforce

4.3.1 New recruits

In most organisations, the skills and abilities of sales assistants were being regularly monitored, assessed and reviewed. All new recruits went through a form of induction, and in some organisations, were on an initial trial or probationary period. In a few organisations, temporary positions were an important route into a permanent job, and this period was used to assess a person's skills and abilities.

Many new recruits were continually assessed or monitored, and were told at their induction that this would be the case. In some organisations, new recruits were tested or put through some sort of review at the end of the induction or probationary period. For example, in an organisation selling clothing, all recruits were tested on their skill levels after nineteen weeks. Those not up to the required standard were asked to leave. Another respondent reported that all employees were continually assessed. There used to be a four and a twelve week appraisal for new employees, looking at, for example, attendance, timekeeping and appearance — things that are quite easy to assess quickly. There was then no assessment until the end of the first year: 'any damage was done by then'. Continual assessment enables managers to pick up any problems or shortcomings as they appear, and try to work with, or develop, staff to overcome these.

The overall theme was that in the majority of organisations, new and existing employees are under increasing pressure to perform, and are monitored more carefully to ensure that this is

happening. It was frequently commented that it was usually clear fairly quickly whether new recruits were suitable or not. Furthermore, in many organisations, attempts were being made to introduce more rigorous recruitment procedures, which were more likely to deliver the most suitable types of people.

4.3.2 On-going assessment and appraisal

Appraisal

Not all organisations participating in this study had a formal appraisal system. One manager (of a smaller company), for example, reported that he had looked at the potential for introducing appraisals and read the literature. He had come to the conclusion that there were a number of pitfalls, and that it was not necessarily appropriate for that business. Furthermore, appraisals take time, and staff were already pushed for time. Those with no formal appraisal system were using a variety of simple indicators of staff performance. For example, their time keeping, the level of service they provided, and appearance. The level of service was assessed through talking to staff and managers observing them at work.

Appraisals took a number of forms. Some were linked to competency frameworks, others to a broad assessment of performance in the main skill areas. Some were linked to pay, although this was more common for managers than sales assistants. Appraisals were rarely conducted in isolation, but linked into more continual observation and assessment of staff performance. For example, one respondent reported that prior to the appraisal, a history on each staff member was built up through management observation.

In some organisations, appraisals were conducted annually; in others, more often. Appraisals were frequently linked into development reviews and the identification of training and development needs. It was emphasised that the appraisal was not meant to be confrontational, but conducted in a fashion that helped people learn through mistakes and build on their existing knowledge and abilities.

A number of organisations had only relatively recently introduced appraisals for sales assistants, and were still developing and refining the system. This links closely with the

increasing demands placed on sales assistants. A number of respondents discussed the widening recognition within their organisation that the skills of sales assistants were key to its success. The growth in attention paid to assessing and monitoring the skills of sales assistants are a recognition of their importance and the need to develop their skills and abilities. However, it could also be argued that this was a form of policing.

Appraisal and monitoring also had a range of other functions. In one organisation, for example, the appraisal system was being reviewed and changed as one means of implementing cultural change. An element of self-assessment was being introduced into the system, and it was hoped that this would encourage staff to own their skills, take responsibility and become more involved.

More general monitoring and assessment

Alongside, and related to any appraisal systems where they existed, or separately where they did not, managers and supervisors played a key role in monitoring and assessing the skills and abilities of sales assistants. Indeed, supervisors, line managers and the more senior managers within stores are increasingly expected to take a major role in ensuring staff have or acquire the necessary skills and abilities to do their job. As with appraisal, it was stressed that this monitoring was not supposed to lead to confrontation. It was better to pick up 'bad practice' before it became embedded, rather than 'hauling staff over the coals'. It was argued that managers could use mistakes to help sales assistants learn and develop.

In one chain of stores, for example, it was reported that managers and all senior staff had a very 'hands on' approach to the business. They frequently worked alongside the sales assistants, and assessed their abilities and skills as they did so. Section leaders, line managers and store managers might be trained to observe staff skills, to monitor the outcomes of any training events, or to observe and monitor the social skills of staff. Most stores have a weekly communication or training period, and these issues are sometimes discussed at this.

The personnel and training managers we interviewed were usually based in particular stores, and/or frequently visited a range of stores in the course of their work. They acted as another, possibly more detached, source of comment on the skills and

abilities of staff. During the course of the interview, a number commented on examples of 'good' and 'bad' practice they had noticed while passing through a store. It was commented: 'you can quickly pick up what is not the norm on the shop floor'. For example, one respondent had heard a completely wrong piece of information being given to a customer about the stores return and refund policy. Another commented about the high and consistent level of customer service they had noticed on a visit to one store. This type of observation was used as feedback to stores, not necessarily to any individuals concerned but as a part of a general learning process.

Technology

The use of technology to monitor staff did not emerge as an important theme in this study, although a few respondents did report that sales assistants logged into the tills individually and the speed of their service could be monitored.

Other measures of performance

A number of stores use mystery shoppers to monitor the level of customer and other service provided by staff. Sometimes, an individual store might initiate such a visit, or the head office may have a regular programme of mystery shoppers visiting all stores and feeding back their views.

Customer surveys were less frequently mentioned, but were an important source of information for some organisations, both on the skills of their staff and other factors:

> *'We poke our customers around a hell of a lot.'*

For example, one respondent reported that customers most frequently commented on their desire for car parking and consistent store layout. Another respondent reported that, despite the general perception that the stores had an aggressive sales technique, customer surveys showed that this was by no means the case, and that many customers wandered around for ages without receiving any attention. In other organisations, as described in the section on skills, sales assistants were encouraged to talk generally to customers to obtain feedback.

One respondent reported that they analysed customer complaints. One of the main complaints was that staff had been

'downright rude'. This information had to be used carefully. In most cases, it was a one-off occurrence — it had occurred because an assistant was having a bad day, for example. If such circumstances were managed carefully, a complainant could be turned into a loyal customer, and the complaint made into a learning process for the member of staff involved. However, such information could occasionally lead to disciplinary procedures being taken, in particular if a member of staff was consistently complained about.

Comments made by visitors to stores, for example, by sales representatives or those checking on specialist products, were also reported to be used as general feedback on staff performance. Sales performance, although possibly a more important indicator of management performance, was also sometimes used as a measure.

Some of these forms of monitoring and assessment related to the skills and abilities of individuals. Others might be used more generally to indicate a general training or development need in a store. For example, customer surveys and feedback might suggest that staff generally were under performing in the area of customer service, or a fall-off in sales performance might be attributed to a need to reinforce various skills (unless there was another definite explanation).

4.4 Summary

Our evidence suggests that greater attention was being paid to the recruitment and assessment of sales assistants than in the past. In many ways, this study has probably picked up examples of 'best practice', through talking to personnel managers and focusing on large organisations. Nevertheless, the managers we talked to reported that, because recruitment and assessment was largely the responsibility of line and store managers, they could not guarantee things were done in the way the company thought appropriate.

The recruitment process was being formalised, and procedures adopted to ensure that those people with the most appropriate attitudes and characteristics were selected. Qualifications were little used in the recruitment process, and although past experience in the retail industry was frequently viewed positively, this was not always the case and it did not guarantee people a

job. There was still much experimentation and development occurring in an attempt to identify appropriate measures of potential. The increasing emphasis on customer service in obtaining a competitive edge was driving much of this change.

Although not all organisations had appraisals systems, sales assistants were increasingly being included in any systems which did exist. Appraisal was only one method used to assess performance, and it was frequently the case that one of the roles of managers was to constantly monitor and observe how sales assistants were behaving and performing. Again, the emphasis on customer service, and the role of sales assistants in this, was helping to drive this activity. It was often reported that this observation and monitoring played a role in the training and development of sales assistants, and in improving their performance. However, it could also be seen in a more negative sense, as a form of policing.

5. Skills Gaps and Recruitment Difficulties

5.1 Introduction

An overall theme of this study has been the increasing demands placed on sales assistants and the greater emphasis, almost 'professionalisation', of the skills and abilities required of them. The study was conducted at a time when there was a relatively low level of recruitment difficulty in the economy generally, and there were very few reports from respondents of any difficulty in recruiting. However, the skills and abilities required of sales assistants are changing. In particular, there has been a greater emphasis on interpersonal and 'people' skills, and in some organisations this emphasis has been relatively recent. What is, therefore, surprising is the lack of reported skill gaps amongst existing employees reported by our respondents. Many respondents felt that, as a whole, the skills of sales assistants in their organisation had a some way to go before they were fully at the level aspired to, but that there were no major gaps.

5.2 Difficulties in recruiting

Recruitment difficulties were not widely reported, and where they did exist were not seen as causing significant problems. One respondent did report a concern for the future. This person felt that there was evidence of mounting difficulties in some areas, and worry that the labour shortages of the late 1980s might re-emerge in some areas.

Most organisations were experiencing pockets of difficulty, related to local demographic factors and the level of competition from other sources of employment. The convenience stores which open very long hours did have difficulties filling some shifts. Other organisations had difficulties recruiting staff to

work, for example, very part-time hours and Sundays. The level of competition from other employers, not always retailers, was causing difficulty in a few locations.

Pay was sometimes seen as an issue. One manager reported that they had been told they had difficulties recruiting because their pay levels were too low, compared to the competition. Others commented that, although pay levels were not that competitive, they had difficulties raising them due to financial pressures, but tried to compete for staff in other ways:

'We can't compete on pay but we try to care for our staff.'

A number of specific problems were reported but these were usually of a fairly local nature. For example, stores in areas where there are many social problems find that this impacts on their recruitment. There might be a high level of turnover of staff due to social problems experienced outside work. The chain of convenience stores had difficulty in recruiting in some areas with a high crime rate, as they were wary of recruiting those with a criminal record.

Some recruitment difficulties related to particular groups. For example, one chain of stores wanted more older workers but, due to their image as a younger person's store, had problems in attracting applications from this group. A number of adverse comments were made on the qualities of young people. They were generally felt to be less reliable than more mature people. However, it was acknowledged that the difficulties were more in obtaining 'good quality' young people because such a high proportion now go on to further and higher education. Some stores are able to overcome this through employing students (school, college and university) both during the holidays and in term time, if an educational institution was located nearby.

Where there were difficulties in recruiting, it was rarely a problem of lack of numbers: 'we can recruit plenty of bodies'. The gap in requirements was most frequently in terms of the attitudes, personal skills and behaviour of applicants:

'We are still not attracting good people.'

The increasing emphasis on customer service and 'people' skills could not always be matched in the recruitment process. This did not, however, seem to be a major concern. Some organisations

were adjusting their recruitment processes to more accurately identify people with suitable personal and behavioural characteristics. Others reported that managers were being given the necessary tools and materials to work with new recruits to enhance their abilities and skills.

5.3 Skills gaps within the existing workforce

Most respondents reported that the existing workforce did not necessarily have all the skills and abilities described earlier, or that those they had were not at an appropriate level. However, no one reported a major gap between the existing skills of their workforce and those they would prefer them to have. There were a number of elements to this.

Although personal and behavioural attributes have long been a key focus in the recruitment of sales assistants, a number of organisations had only relatively recently introduced a major emphasis on customer service and enhanced 'people' skills. It was therefore felt that there was a gap because expectations were increasing, and recruitment, training and development procedures and practices had not yet caught up, or been in operation long enough for the skills and abilities of staff to have caught up:

> *'It is our fault. We have not trained people properly or been clear about what we expect of them.'*

This emphasis on different types of skills and abilities was also seen as part of a longer term cultural change and therefore it was expected to take some time for practices to change and become embedded. Furthermore, it was argued that to keep ahead of the competition, standards are always being pushed higher and there will always be a gap. Continually improving standards and pushing staff to higher levels will be a major challenge for the future.

Although senior managers were trying to ensure consistency between stores in the company, there were reports that standards were patchy, both between and within stores. The differences between stores sometimes depended on the labour market in which they were recruiting. In some areas, there appear to be fewer people who have the necessary attitudinal and behavioural attributes. However, much emphasis was placed on the quality

of managers. This was a theme running throughout the interviews. Some managers are more able to motivate and train their staff and adopt the expectations put on them by the company than others.

There was much discussion of the behavioural and attitudinal attributes expected in sales assistants, and it was in these attributes that any gaps were seen to exist. In all organisations, some sales assistants have excellent 'people' skills. They will always go the 'extra mile' for the customer, develop relationships with regular customers and remember their names. For example, in one company, there had been a major shift in emphasis away from the products and physical environment of the store to customer service and an emphasis on dealing with people. Some staff had reacted very well, dealing with people was the thing they had always wanted to do. However, others were less keen. They preferred to concentrate on the physical aspects of selling, keeping their area of the store clean, tidy and fully stocked. Another respondent described how it was very easy to avoid customers if you wanted to. Extensive training had accompanied this shift in emphasis, but there were a hard core of people who, even with one-to-one coaching were not able, or were totally unwilling, to change their way of working. A few had apparently moved to the early morning shift which restocked the store before it opened each day.

Views about the extent to which people can be 'trained' to adopt the necessary behaviour and attitudes are discussed in the next section. However, it was generally agreed that the gaps which did exist were, on the whole, not presenting major problems. Indeed, it was suggested that any gaps were getting smaller, as managers at all levels become cleverer at communicating the culture of the organisation, bringing staff on board and generating enthusiasm.

5.4 Can behaviour and attitudes be changed through training?

There was some disagreement amongst respondents about the extent to which behaviour and attitudes could be changed through training. The general consensus of opinion was that an interest and desire to work with people in a selling environment had to exist, along with a certain level of inter-personal skills. There has to be something to work with, and an ability and desire

to learn and develop. Similar conclusions have been reached in other studies (see, for example, Dench, 1995).

The technical skills needed to work as a sales assistant were argued to be fairly simple and straightforward, and generally easily acquired. It was the skills and abilities relating to dealing with people which were seen as more problematic. Training and development were, however, seen as only part of the package necessary to move people along.

It was argued that staff needed to be given 'hints, tips and advice', the tools needed to deal with customers. There was also a certain element of helping staff to recognise and understand aspects of basic human behaviour. Various measures were being adopted to help increase the confidence and self-esteem of sales assistants, helping them to value the skills and abilities they had and realise that they are not 'just' a sales assistant. In some organisations, there was an emphasis on encouraging ownership and involvement:

> *'If the whole company has a culture and works hard enough, we can change people.'*

A number of positive examples were provided of people taking on and developing into new responsibilities.

6. Training and Development

6.1 Introduction

Employers in Britain are frequently criticised for not providing enough training for their employees. Numerous international comparisons of, for example, the qualification levels of the population and training practices of employers, place Britain towards the bottom in any ranking. Yet there is evidence of a growth in training provision during the past decade, despite the recessionary conditions of the early 1990s (see, for example, Felstead and Green, 1993). Retailing employers are usually among the highest trainers in any sectoral analysis (Dench, 1993a and 1993b; HMSO, 1989).

This chapter explores the types and amounts of training being delivered in the organisations, how this was changing, and the accreditation of training.

6.2 Training of new recruits

All organisations involved in this study provided some sort of induction for new recruits. At a minimum, in one of the smaller organisations, the store manager took new recruits through the regulations and procedures. They were then attached to another member of staff and expected to watch and learn for the first two or three weeks. This organisation had one of the least well developed approaches to training, and the respondent did report that he thought this was an area in which they were 'a bit weak'.

Induction usually included all, or most, of the following:

- an introduction to the company, its history and approach
- an introduction to the store in which the recruit was working
- where the new recruit fits into these

- the contract, terms and conditions
- health and safety, hygiene (especially in food stores)
- basic information on the range and nature of products sold
- security
- any rules and regulations
- lines of communication
- information about any training to be given, monitoring, assessment.

This might be delivered by the store manager, a line or section manager, or through the use of a video or staff handbook. The use of various technologies to provide training and development is a theme returned to below.

The length of time before a new recruit started work on the shop floor varied, both between and within companies. It was frequently the case that new recruits spent very little time being instructed before going onto the shop floor. One respondent described how individual store managers have different preferences and operate accordingly. Some like new recruits to spend only a couple of hours on the basics before starting work on the shop floor. The necessary skills are acquired through top-up training and coaching as they go along. In other stores, the manager might prefer new recruits to spend two weeks mainly off the shop floor, acquiring 'the skills necessary to be a good sales assistant'.

The induction usually included an element of training in the basic skills of selling and customer service, and the technical skills associated with working in a store, for example, working a till, stock taking and monitoring. This is done in a variety of ways. Line managers and other managers play a key role in training, supporting and coaching. In some stores, new recruits are attached to a more experienced member of staff who acts as a sponsor or mentor. Where this existed it was reported to work very well. Some training courses or events were provided for new recruits, while in other circumstances new recruits might join in a general programme of training being provided, for example, in customer service or selling skills.

Workbooks, sometimes including videos, were widely used to provide basic instruction in, for example, customer service, selling skills and product knowledge (see also NRTC, 1995).

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Very little induction and initial training is provided outside the store in which a person is employed although, occasionally, new recruits from a group of stores might be brought together. One company did provide a week-long residential course for all new recruits, although this might not happen immediately on joining, depending on vacancies on the course. This focused on all aspects of customer service and selling, including role plays and visits to the stores of competitors, after which different approaches to selling and service could be discussed.

The length of the induction and basic training varied considerably. This was related to a number of factors including, for example, the extent to which training in retailing and selling skills was concentrated in the initial few months, or sales assistants were expected to become proficient in the basics and build on these. For example, one respondent reported that the minimum induction included twelve hours training over approximately two weeks:

> *'The very minimum to make them useful and helpful to the customer.'*

Others went through a longer period of induction: six weeks for full-time staff and ten weeks for part-time staff.

New recruits normally went through a similar induction period, however many hours they were working. There was an issue which relates to provision more generally, around training and meeting the development needs of staff working very part-time hours (see also NRTC, 1995). This created logistical problems. They might not be there during the weekly training or communication period, or there was a difficulty if too much of their working time was taken up with training. The approach to training temporary recruits also varied. In some cases, they were provided with the same, or a slightly reduced, programme as for permanent recruits, especially if not taken on to cover for busy periods. Training temporary staff taken on for the Christmas period was most likely to be brief. The need was to have them out on the shop floor selling as quickly as possible. Some stores had a bank of temporary staff they are able to call on, and induction training was less of a difficulty in such circumstances.

6.3 On-going training

Very few respondents were able to say how much training was provided for sales assistants, but almost all reported a wide range of provision and placed an increasing emphasis on the importance of training. Chapter 3 discussed the emphasis placed on employees taking more responsibility for many aspects of their work, including their training. Respondents reported a preference for sales assistants who were interested in learning and in developing their existing skills and new skills (CBI, 1994; NRTC, 1995). This relates closely to a growing policy interest in lifetime learning and the promotion of individual commitment to learning.

6.3.1 The delivery of training

Training was being delivered through a variety of different methods, including:

- on-the-job instruction and coaching
- off-the-job instruction in a training room
- videos
- distance and open learning
- multi-media and other forms of computer based training, *eg* CD-ROM
- the use of workbooks and similar self-teaching packages.

Many respondents did not talk about training as much as learning and development, and communication:

> *'Training is an anachronistic term; learning is more appropriate. There is no chalk and talk these days. It is about getting people involved and finding out for themselves.'*

There were a number of reasons for this. Training and development was sometimes part of a general cultural change, moving the organisation and employees in different and new directions. This included encouraging ownership and commitment. Encouraging employees (at all levels) to take greater responsibility for their own training was part of this.

The time available for training was another issue. Any increase in business in existing stores was expected to be absorbed by existing staff, and sales assistants were being expected to take

on increasing responsibilities. There was also an overall concern to keep costs, including 'training costs' under control. Meeting the training needs of part-timers was a further consideration, especially as some staff work unusual shifts or very small numbers of hours. Computer based training, open and distance learning, workbooks and similar types of training material increase the flexibility with which training can be delivered, but also put an onus on individuals to take up the opportunities available to them.

6.3.2 Employee perceptions

It would be interesting to know more about the perceptions of sales assistants on the provision of training. A study commissioned by USDAW and the Distributive Industries Training Trust (Forrester, James and Thorns, 1995) found that shop workers report receiving less training than is normally reported to be the case in surveys of employers. Some of the differences can be attributed to methodological differences between the various surveys. However, it is also likely to be the case that employers and employees differ in their understanding of what constitutes training (Rigg, 1988; Campanelli and Channell, 1994). One respondent commented:

> *'People are trained without realising they are being trained.'*

6.3.3 Who receives training?

In theory, training was available to all staff, however many hours they worked. However, as reported above, reaching part-time staff, especially those working very few hours, was difficult. Other studies have found that part-time staff are less likely than full-time employees to receive training (Forrester *et al.*, 1995). Although company trainers might expect part-time staff to have equal access to training, store and line managers may not always operate in this way, or even think about the extent to which different groups of staff have access to the training. For example, in one organisation, a store manager had been concerned about the performance of some part-time staff. It was subsequently found that they were not working when various training sessions had occurred. Given the opportunity, some decided to attend these sessions in addition to their normal working hours.

Some training was provided to all employees. For example, there might be a push on customer service skills and training events, and packages would be developed to take this forward. Other training was aimed at, or provided for, specific individuals for whom a training need had been identified. Some areas of selling require greater expertise and knowledge than others, and people working in these might receive more specialist training.

6.3.4 The content of training

On the whole, there was little 'sheep dipping'. Sales assistants were provided with training as and when they needed it, rather than because they had not yet done that element of the programme, or been on a particular course. There was evidence of increasing attention being paid to the training needs of the business.

Much of the on-going training provided was to update product knowledge. In many stores, products or the materials from which they are made, for example, are frequently changing and being updated. Most clothes stores had a number of different ranges each year. Sales assistants have to be kept informed of such changes, especially as customers increasingly expect to have all their questions answered. This training took a number of different forms, including videos, leaflets and other publications and workbooks. In some cases, it included the chance to try out various products, for example, beauty products. The weekly training or communication session held in most stores was also an important means of putting this type of information across.

Another important element of training was the reinforcing and continual development of, for example, customer service and selling skills, and generally 'dealing with people'. In these areas, much of the training involved providing staff with the necessary tools, advising on ways of dealing with people and persuading them to buy, and increasing the self-confidence of sales assistants to enable them to do these things. Although many stores do have an overall approach to dealing with customers, it was rare that staff were all expected to act in exactly the same way:

'People are not robots.'

'We do not want clones.'

6.3.5 Weekly training sessions

The weekly training or communication session was a very important means of providing many types of training, in its broadest sense, to sales assistants. Some organisations have a set programme of topics to be covered, to ensure that assistants in all stores are receiving the same type of information and instruction. In others, more discretion was allowed. For example, a store manager might address issues of specific concern in that particular store, address a general training need or simply keep staff generally informed. This weekly session might also be used to involve and 'empower' staff, a forum through which their views and ideas were sought. In one organisation, the personnel manager undertook to find the answer to any questions raised in one session by the next one.

6.4 Changes in the amount and delivery of training

Other studies have reported an increase in the number of employers providing training in recent years (Dench, 1993; Felstead and Green, 1993; Industrial Society; Metcalf *et al.*, 1994). Most organisations involved in this study were reported to be putting greater effort into, and paying more attention to, training. In a few, the main changes had occurred more than three years ago — the period asked about during the interview. In some others, it was recognised that training was important, but there had been little change in recent years.

In most cases, the greater effort being put into training had resulted in an increase in the amount of training being provided, but this was not always the case. It was frequently argued that training was being looked at more closely and questions were being asked such as: 'how is this related to our business needs?'. Training was becoming more focused, covering what was essential: 'there are not a lot of frills'.

The delivery of training was generally the responsibility of store and line mangers. The majority of central training managers we spoke to reported that their role was increasingly as facilitators and to provide the materials and tools needed by managers to deliver training. The devolvement of responsibility was allowing central resources to be redeployed: 'enabling us to do what we are good at'. There was also greater emphasis being placed on the training of store and line managers as trainers and coachers.

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These changes were taking some time to embed, and many store managers still looked to the central training function to provide training. It was also, in a few cases, providing some blockages. For example, some managers were reported to be short-sighted and focus more on the cost of training, especially when resources were stretched. There was also some evidence of the type of view:

'I got where I am without any training, so why do they need any?'

6.5 The accreditation of training

The majority of training was not accredited in any way. However, some organisations were allowing employees to achieve NVQs.

When personnel and training managers talk about the skills required of sales assistants, many of the themes broadly equate with the NVQ frameworks, especially Levels 1 and 2. There were a number of reasons why some organisations were not using NVQs to accredit training. The main reasons were that they could see no real advantage to the business of doing so, and that they were concerned about the bureaucracy and amount of paperwork and administration involved. Furthermore, comments were made about the assessment of NVQs, and that they only show that people have an ability to meet the criteria in the organisation in which they work. Respondents also reported that staff were not asking for NVQs or qualifications.

A number of organisations were still thinking about becoming involved, and might well do as NVQs become more widespread. Several managers reported that they had their own framework which usually went beyond the NVQ framework. They preferred to use this, although a few would like to have it accredited in some way.

In a few organisations, new recruits were automatically put through NVQ Level 1 and, indeed, a number of respondents equated this with a basic induction to sales work. A small number are aiming to have a large proportion of their sales employees qualified at NVQ Level 2 by the year 2000. The majority were involved in NVQs to a lesser extent. For example, some organisations were putting the majority of those aged under 25 through, as they received funding to assist in doing this. Others were experimenting in putting a few interested employees through and seeing how things go.

There were a number of reasons for becoming involved in NVQs:

- It enabled training to be more fully monitored and evaluated, because of the continual assessment element of the qualification.
- It motivated employees, because their achievements are being recognised and sales work was seen as requiring skills.
- Some funding was available.
- It provided some employees with something they had never before had the chance to achieve. For example, many sales assistants are women with children who are achieving GCSEs and possibly going on to further and higher education. By providing them with the opportunity to obtain a qualification, it gives them a measure of their own achievements and abilities.

6.6 Summary

The majority of organisations were providing training for their sales assistants.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

The interviews with employers closed with a brief discussion of some future concerns. These emphasise a number of points raised in this report and were confirmed in the seminar discussing our findings. The first part of this chapter reports these. The second part draws some more general conclusions.

7.2 Key themes for the future

7.2.1 The importance of people skills

A major theme running through discussions of any future concerns was the continuation of many current trends and the need for retail organisations to continual making efforts to meet and address these. Customer service, selling and 'people' skills will continue to be of prime importance, and a key feature on which organisations compete. It was argued that the challenge for the future will be: 'to make the change happen', and further embed any changes in emphasis and culture:

> *'From our point of view, we need very much to get right what we know now.'*

Customer expectations are expected to continue increasing, and there will be a need to at least keep up with the competition. For example, it was argued that supermarkets and the organ.-sations providing basic functional products will need to increase the speed with which they serve customers. Other aspects of shopping may be seen more as a leisure activity, and the appropriate level and type of service will need to be provided. Sales assistants will need to be flexible, adjusting to the requirements of customers as they change and evolve.

7.2.2 Obtaining the right people

A related theme was the need to look more closely at how to obtain 'the right people'. There was some discussion earlier in this report about the development of different methods of assessing potential recruits. It is likely that greater effort will be put into this and that retailing employers will be increasingly looking for people exhibiting the right attitudes and behaviours:

> *'Very personable people.'*
>
> *'People able to take initiative and make decisions.'*
>
> *'People with a dexterity with systems; the job of a sales assistant is becoming more sophisticated and complex.'*

The provision of training and development and other methods of promoting the appropriate behaviours, were also of concern. It was argued that a consistency in training standards across stores had to be worked towards, time had to be found for training, and that the idea of continual learning had to become embedded. There has to be a move away from the idea that you have only been trained if you have been on a course, and a realisation that there are many potential learning opportunities during the course of a working day.

7.2.3 Motivating and rewarding people

Motivating and rewarding people to take on new responsibilities and methods of working will continue to be an issue. The emphasis was on non-financial rewards. Several organisations were already seen as good payers, and provided a range of additional benefits. Others reported that because of the need to make a profit, there was a limited potential to increase pay rates. There were a number of methods being adopted to motivate staff. In a few organisations, various prizes and awards were made for high levels of customer service, for example. However, managers wanted motivation to go deeper than this:

> *'We should not have to pay people to smile, when it is part of their job.'*

Selling in change, involving employees at all levels in designing and implementing change and continual reinforcement of the organisational culture and approach, were among the methods

being adopted. It was also argued that as a result of the changes, jobs were more interesting and rewarding. Furthermore, all sales assistants are customers themselves and are therefore able to see the point of change and development.

7.2.4 Changing trading patterns

Longer daily and weekly trading hours was a further issue raised. Different organisations are adopting different procedures for staffing stores, especially on Sundays. As reported earlier, some have Sunday-only teams, others prefer a proportion of the usual workforce to work on Sundays. We came across no examples of companies forcing people to work on Sundays. Sunday trading in particular, but also longer opening hours generally, present employers with a variety of challenges, including providing a consistently good standard of service and training and developing staff who work unusual or very smaller numbers of hours.

7.2.5 Technology

Although it appears that the main technological changes have already occurred, at least for the present, technology continues to present challenges for the future. For example, in some organisations, modern tills enable trading patterns to be more closely monitored and staff hours to be more closely related to these. Other organisations are looking at faster tills and authorisation of credit card transactions. Although customers might not want to be rushed in choosing their purchases, most want to pay and move on quickly.

There have been a number of recent television programmes describing possible future technological trends in retailing, and this theme emerged in our discussions with the NRTC. There is likely to be a division between shopping for everyday, functional goods and the purchase of more luxury and leisure items. It is argued that customers increasingly want to deal with the former as quickly as possible. Home deliveries are already a reality, and one organisation involved in this study was entirely providing this type of service. If the trend towards this develops, the job of some sales assistants will change markedly. There will still be a focus on customer service, selling and 'people' skills, but the jobs will be those receiving telephone orders, 'pickers and packers' and delivery drivers. As more households are linked

into the Internet, for example, ordering by computer is becoming a possibility. Virtual shopping is very much in the future, but still a possibility which will again change the level and type of demand for retail skills, and provide a challenge to existing retail organisations.

7.2.6 A key role of managers

There is a key role for store and line managers in the training, development and motivation of sales assistants. In many organisations, central training and personnel managers are trying to encourage these managers to take further responsibility and provide them with the necessary tools. Changing management styles and embedding this within the culture of an organisation, will continue to be an issue.

7.2.7 Other issues

A range of other issues were mentioned. Some of these have implications for the skills of sales assistants, others are more general. The range, quality and price of products will continue to be important. As well as meeting the expectations of customers, it was reported that some retail organisations will look more closely at what people want and try to influence demand through providing new and different types of products and services. Other organisations might concentrate on the type of service, for example, through providing luxury facilities in their stores.

7.3 Further conclusions

The job of a sales assistant is increasingly demanding, and it could be argued that higher level skills are required. Higher levels of inter-personal and general personal abilities are definitely required. Sales jobs have always been seen as existing towards the lower levels of any occupational hierarchy, and it was argued that this needs to change:

> *'Shop work is not the lowest of the low.'*

There are a number of explanations which can be put forward for the historical position of sales work, including the relatively low level of skill needed at one time (although this could

probably be contested) and, in particular, the domination of the occupation by women (Philips and Taylor, 1986).

The skills required of sales assistants are becoming increasingly complex. Many aspects of customer service and selling involve some understanding of human behaviour and psychology. Sales assistants are also being asked to take greater responsibility for, and initiative in, their job. It remains to be understood how far sales assistants really feel 'empowered' and the extent to which they can be motivated to go further. Job security is an important motivator, and there are many people looking for jobs. However, as one respondent commented: 'at the moment, employers are still in a fairly powerful position; this might not always be the case and it may become increasingly difficult to find recruits, especially those displaying the necessary behaviours and attitudes'.

A possible element of conflict, emerging from the literature and our data, is the extent to which sales assistants feel pressured to perform through the various methods of monitoring and assessment discussed earlier. Other studies (eg Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1988 and 1990) have suggested that sales assistants may be resistant to some elements of change, and build in elements of resistance into their behaviour.

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